New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

The next scheduled theatre opening in New York is in September; issue containing complete reviews will be mailed as usual the following week.

Volume XVIII, Number 13 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of May 20, 1957

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Theatre Openings

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"New Girl in Town"

New York Post
May 15, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD WATTS Jr.

Another Triumph for Gwen Verdon

In the long view of history, Gwen Verdon will probably not seem as important to the drama as Eugene O'Neill, but she is certainly far more vital to the success of "New Girl in Town." The musical play based on O'Neill's "Anna Christie," which opened last night at the 46th St. Theater, has its difficulties in trying to transform the great dramatist's early success into a song-and-dance show, but Miss Verdon, who has a vivid sense of character to go with her other phenomenal theatrical gifts, gives it the excitement required to turn an average entertainment into a good one.

This isn't to deny that "New Girl in Town" has sizable virtues of its own. It has a lively and colorful turn-of-the-century background, and George Abbott has given it the sort of expert staging for which he is famous. Bob Fosse has managed to find a few spots in the course of the narrative for his effective choreography, and Bob Merrill has composed an agreeable score, including several particularly attractive songs. Among them, my immediate enthusiasm went to numbers entitled "It's Good to Be Alive," "Sunshine Girl" and "Look at 'Er."

The Book

It is Mr. Abbott's libretto that causes me a little worry. In general, it follows the O'Neill drama with a good deal of fidelity, but problems arise. On the one hand, the story of the old Swedish tugboat captain, his blowzy mistress, his unhappy prostitute daughter, and her romantic Irish lover has a way of interfering with the songs and dances out of sheer determination to be loyal to "Anna Christie," and, on the other, the process of making the narrative fit into a musical comedy has caused most of the dramatic power, the warmth of character and the richness of speech to disappear.

But this book difficulty, while a noticeable handicap, becomes of comparatively minor importance because Miss Verdon is always present with that private magic of hers. Everyone knows about her tremendous ability to be vivid, exciting and alluring on a stage, her skill at putting over a song, and her brilliance as a dancer. But she is also a gifted emotional actress, who can be genuinely touching, and she possesses an electric dramatic presence, which enables her to make even her first entrance as the sad, beaten, defensive prostitute tingle with unspoken tragedy.

There was a time last evening when the suspense of "New Girl in Town" seemed to consist of wondering how the libretto would manage to get Miss Verdon into her dancing. It required some doing, but, toward the end of the first act, it was arranged, and there was cause for happiness. There is no more delightful dancer anywhere, for she can be at once graceful, lovely, humorous, exciting—it is impossible to write about Gwen Verdon without continual use of that word—and freshly imaginative. It is all quite a triumph for a wonderfully brilliant performer.

Although Miss Verdon clearly dominates the proceedings, Thelma Ritter, who has been spending her time memorably in the movies of recent years, is excellent as the slatternly Marthy, who can't help causing Anna trouble even though she wants to be friendly to the old sailor's daughter. Cameron Prud'homme has the proper sense of character for old Chris, who can't bring himself to believe Anna isn't an innocent girl. The role of the romantic Matt Burke isn't written with much richness, but George Wallace sings and acts it well. But the evening is chiefly Gwen Verdon's.

"NEW GIRL IN TOWN"

Musical in two acts with book by George Abbott, music and lyrics by Bob Merrill, based on the play "Anna Christie" by Eugene O'Neill; dances and musical numbers staged by Bob Fosse; production designed by Rouben Ter-Arutunian; musical direction by Hal Hastings; orchestrations by Robert Russell Bennett and Philip J. Lang; staged by Mr. Abbott; presented by Frederick Brisson, Robert E. Griffith and Harold S. Prince at the 46th Street Theatre, May 14, 1957. The cast:

Lily.....Lulu Bates
Alderman.....Michael Quinn
Chris.....Cameron Prud'homme
Seaman.....H. F. Green
Marthy.....Thelma Ritter
Oscar.....Del Anderson
Pete.....Eddie Philips
Mrs. Smith....Dorothy Stinnette
Bartender.....Mark Dawson
Anna.....Gwen Verdon
Pearl.....Mara Landi
Mat.....George Wallace
Mrs. Hammacher..Jean Handzlik
Masher.....John Aristides
Krimp.....John Ford
Henry.....Edgar Daniels

DAILY NEWS
May 15, 1957

Gwen Verdon and Thelma Ritter Delightful in 'New Girl in Town'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Upon first consideration it would seem to be an odd and difficult enterprise to make a musical out of Eugene O'Neill's "Anna Christie," the story of a tubercular scarlet woman who finds true love. But it has been done before. "New Girl in Town" had a stylish premiere at the 46th St. Theatre last evening. Anna is O'Neill's Camille, and Camille inspired a great musical or two in her time. "New Girl" is not, however, in the grand opera vein. It is Broadway, and excellent Broadway, with some catchy songs and lively dances and two wonderful performances by Gwen Verdon and Thelma Ritter.

O'Neill wrote of Anna, the ailing and remorseful strumpet who comes from the Midwest to seek comfort and shelter from her dimly-remembered father, Chris, a barge captain. He wrote of Anna's shining love for Mat, the burly survivor of a shipwreck, and of Mat's revulsion at discovering her past.

Skillfully Done

George Abbott has fashioned this grand-opera plot into a good light Broadway libretto, and he has staged it with the crisp skill which is to be expected of him. Bob Merrill, new to Broadway but famed on phonographs, has written a lively and occasionally beguiling set of song and dance numbers. Rouben Ter-Artunian has devised many exciting turn-of-the-century costumes and waterfront settings, and Bob Fosse has directed a series of dances which gives the production the life it needs.

Miss Verdon, as Anna, is remarkable. She acts with great honesty and effect, she sings bewitchingly, she dances with boundless skill, and is very beautiful. Miss Ritter is the one, though, who provides practically all the fun of the show. In the role of the temporarily cast-off companion of Anna's father, she is sleazy, raffish, warm-hearted, alcohol-hungry and a superb comedienne. She has been away from Broadway for a decade, and last night I discovered that this has been much too long a time for a woman so gifted in pantomime, timing and humor.

Fine Dances

There are other good performances in a big and thoroughly professional cast. Cameron Prud'-Homme, a dependable character actor, comes up with a fine, salty performance as Anna's father, Chris, and he sings and dances with the best of them. George Wallace sings lustily as the lusty Mat, and Mark Dawson gives a fine impersonation of an O'Neill-type bartender.

Bob Fosse's dance numbers—and his dancing company—are extraordinarily good, except for a questionable dream sequence in which the now-purified Miss Verdon imagines that she has returned to her once-sordid life. Bob Merrill's tunes and lyrics have bounce and some originality, and "Look at 'Er" is a standout.

There is nothing against making "Anna Christie" into a musical. But, although it is done tastefully, it isn't a family show —obviously.

The New York Times
May 15, 1957

The Theatre: Singing Anna Christie

'New Girl in Town' Opens at 46th St.

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IN "New Girl in Town," which opened at the Forty-sixth Street Theatre last evening, George Abbott has tried to make the best of the two worlds of drama and musical comedy.

Since the musical comedy flourishes have been contributed by old hands at the business, they are lively and gay, especially when Thelma Ritter starts hors'n 'round. But in one theatregoer's opinion they belong to something less serious, penetrating and powerful than Eugene O'Neill's "Anna Christie," out of which Mr. Abbott has put together his libretto.

•

If "New Girl in Town" proves anything, it reminds us that O'Neill's bittersweet drama of the barge captain's daughter is a wonderful bit of American stage literature. Gwen Verdon plays Anna with great style and insight in the tradition of Pauline Lord. Not long ago Miss Verdon startled the town with some saucy dancing in "Can-Can." From that she moved on to the agile abandon of a hot part in "Damn Yankees."

Don't type her, at least not permanently. For now she emerges in a new incarnation as the slatternly strumpet who is purified by devotion to a tempestuous Irish seaman with the gift of gab. Miss Verdon gives a complete characterization from the slut to the woman—common in manner, but full of pride, disillusioned but willing to believe, a woman of silence and mysteries. It would be an affecting job on any stage. Amid the familiar diversions of a Broadway musical jamboree, it is sobering and admirable.

Mr. Abbott uses "Anna Christie" as a kind of safe anchorage in a storm of dancing and singing. After making standard whoop-de-doo in waterfront bars, on the piers or in dance halls, he returns to the solid story of the barge captain's daughter. Cameron Prud'homme, a first-rate actor, plays the thickheaded, warmhearted barge captain with sincerity and force, and he also sings like a musical trouper. As the passionate Irish seaman, George Wallace is also excellent. He has the swagger and the earnestness. He also has a beautiful baritone voice. "Look at 'Er" is a winning song that carries a romantic story along with gusto when Mr. Wallace pitches into it.

But Mr. Abbott's effort to make a bigtime festival out of a somber theme is not altogether successful. The two substances do not blend easily. Bob Merrill's score is the most flexible of the embellishments. For the theme of the rueful lovers he has composed a number of illuminating songs, like Miss Verdon's radiant "It's Good to Be Alive," her reflective "If That Was Love" and the romantic "Did You Close Your Eyes?" which Miss Verdon and Mr. Wallace sing together. As a writer of rousing or sentimental ballads Mr. Merrill is also accomplished.

Since Mr. Abbott is showman enough to value a salty comic, he has built up the part of the barge captain's woman to suit the style of Miss Ritter. She is an extraordinary funny woman with a way of communicating comedy in flashes—in an irreverent gleam or a cocky strut as a deadpan glance at the audience.

In his ballet numbers, Bob Fosse creates revelry when the musical comedy formula needs it. Inside Rouben Ter-Arutunian's expansive, festive, colorful scenery, which makes grubby locales look clean and inviting, the show goes on with professional abandon. The dancing is sociable and antic.

But the showmanship of "New Girl in Town" seems commonplace against the blunt simplicity of "Anna Christie." Nothing Mr. Abbott can do has the solidity of O'Neill. Since Miss Verdon gives such a moving performance as Anna, this elaborate musical show provokes an impertinent notion: how much better "Anna Christie" would be without so many gaudy trappings.

Journal American
May 15, 1957

New Musical Well-Paced And Zestful

By JOHN McCLAIN

THIS HAS BEEN a great year for discovering or rediscovering Eugene O'Neill: "Long Day's Journey" grabbing most of the season's awards; "Moon for the Misbegotten" brilliantly presented at the Bijou, and "The Iceman Cometh" enjoying a lusty revival at the Circle-in-the-Square downtown. Now comes "New Girl in Town," a musical based on his "Anna Christie," which opened last night at the Forty-sixth St. Theatre.

Devout O'Neill fans will not find much of the atmosphere of the original in this book by George Abbott, but they will be treated to a thoroughly zestful and engaging musical period piece, a show with style, humor and a rollicking score.

Abbott has moved the era of the play back to the turn of the century, and has thus provided Bob Merrill, who supplied music and lyrics, with a more interesting historical setting in which to frolic.

For this prolific young man, undertaking his first Broadway show, has caught the barber-shop harmony and the early barrelhouse beat of the times. Bob Fosse, who staged the dance and musical numbers, has proceeded along the same lines and given us what I believe to be the most brilliant and original choreography job of the year. And his efforts have been superbly matched by the costumes and sets of Rouben Ter-Arutunian. All this adds up to a jolly evening in the theatre, and my one important reservation is the familiar one that the second act can't hold the pace established in the first.

The major chores for the evening are assigned to Gwen Verdon, Thelma Ritter, George Wallace and Cameron Prud'Homme. As Anna, Miss Verdon will not take the honors as the greatest emotional actress of the year, but the part has been reduced to a few scattered scenes and when she dances, which she does frequently, she is the greatest. In "There Ain't No Flies On Me," "Ven I Valse," and in the Second Act Ballet, she is utterly incomparable.

Miss Ritter, too long absent from the theatre, gives a constantly hilarious performance as Martha, the beat-up drinking companion of Anna's father. She scores heavily with a number called "Flings," with Mr. Prud'Homme in "Yer My Friend, Aintcha" and, finally, in "Chess and Checkers."

George Wallace is happily cast in the role of Mat, the hero. He is a good, tough-looking young man with a large baritone voice and a suitably masculine manner. He delivers the "Look At 'Er" ballad which figures to be the show's big romantic number.

Mr. Prud'Homme, the father, comes up with one of his reliable performances, this time feigning a very tolerable Swedish accent and engaging in several musical numbers, including a charming waltz with Miss Verdon. Other bright bits, in particular a specialty called "Sunshine Girl," are contributed by Del Anderson, Eddie Phillips and Mark Dawson, and the all-around singing and dancing of the supporting players are always first rate.

"New Girl in Town" makes the most slight and liberal use of the "Anna Christie" material, but what emerges is, in my opinion, a well-paced and professional musical; it is done with good taste and ingenuity, and the people are delightful. It is not one of the great ones of our time but it is certainly another bright feather in Mr. Abbott's crowded cap.

Daily Mirror

May 15, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'New Girl in Town'; She's All Dated Up

There's a "New Girl in Town" at the 46th Street Theatre, and she's likely to prove a popular number with the local ticket-buyers. In fact, all her dates are taken for the next few months, to the tune of better than $500,000 in the till. The first-nighters, judging by their robust applause, found her lively and entertaining.

The gal, of course, is none other than Eugene O'Neill's Anna Christie, set a-singing and a-dancing by George Abbott and Bob Merrill. Maestro Abbott has sliced the O'Neill saga of the tramp whose soul was cleansed by the sea right thin, but then he had to make way for Merrill's zingy score and Bob Fosse's spirited steps.

WE'VE ALWAYS had a theory that song-and-dance craftsmen should bust up their lovers in the first act, and get them back together in the second. This, Abbott hasn't done; thus, to our way of thinking, lessening the emotional and dramatic impact of that all-important initial canto.

He waits until the second stanza is under way to have a bibulous old biddy from the waterfront spill Anna's past misdeeds into the ears of her unsuspecting boy friend Mat. So, in disillusionment, he has to sail all the way to China and back in the blink of an eye, so that he may realize just how much he cares for the daughter of old Chris, the barge captain.

Let's tab Abbott's scenario as servicable. It's not overly burdened with humor, and it doesn't probe very deeply into the human heart. However, it does provide a workable thread on which to string Merrill's zesty lyrics and tunes and Fosse's show-stopping ensembles.

Robert Russell Bennett and Philip J. Lang have come through with clever orchestrations that fall pleasantly on the ear, with Hal Hastings conducting in the pit. And Rouben Ter-Arutunian has designed atmospheric backgrounds and colorful costumes that catch the flavor of Manhattan's wharves, ginmills and party halls at the turn of the century.

Gwen Verdon is captivating as the Anna, victimized by predatory male relatives in the Midwest, who finally finds a better life with a venturesome sailor. George Wallace has the manliness, swagger and voice for the rowdy and hopeful Mat. Thelma Ritter, a wonderful trouper, garners laughs, when they let her, as the frowsy Marthy.

•

CAMERON PRUD'HOMME is right as Chris, who has neglected his daughter for too many years and then expects her to be a lady. It's good, sound characterization. Mark Dawson and Lulu Bates score when they have the chance.

Frederick Brisson, Robert Griffith and Harold Prince are sponsoring "New Girl in Town." While the new arrival is no "Pajama Game" or "Damn Yankees," it has sufficient merit to keep this fabulous team's record intact: three hits for three times at bat.

Miss Verdon is a doll. Every man's idea of the kind he'd like to have. She's a real triple threat. She can sing, act and dance. Miss Ritter is another member of the distaff side to have in your corner when you want to spell BOX-OFFICE in capital letters. They make "New Girl in Town" worth a trip to the 46th Street Theatre. They turn the extravaganza into a razzle-dazzle rouser.

New York Herald Tribune

May 15, 1957

THEATER

'New Girl in Town'

By WALTER KERR

BECAUSE "New Girl in Town" is a musical version of Eugene O'Neill's "Anna Christie," there inevitably comes a moment when the girl with the unpalatable past must scream at her virtuous lover "Yes, I was in a house—you know what that is, you seen plenty of 'em" and an enraged Mat Burke must hurl her to the floor and stand over her while he shouts "You slut—you dirty slut!"

With this, there is a mighty crash of the cymbals in the pit at the 46th Street, the drummer booms out a savage crescendo and the moment on stage is given a dramatic sound-track accompaniment to support it.

The very next song, however, is a reprise of a bright, breezy, amiably melodic little ditty called "Sunshine Girl," given a nice, boozy soft-shoe treatment by some sports in spats and some girls in 1900 picture-hats.

It's the distance between these two poles, I think, that troubles George Abbott's otherwise neatly-tailored and sleekly turned-out period piece all night long. The score that Bob Merrill has coaxed out of his private pianola is straightforward and quite frequently attractive "pop" stuff. Listen to perky Thelma Ritter pitch her small but splendidly cynical voice into the nuances of a number called "Fling ("It's nice to have someone to chirp with, have a beer with, have a burp with") and you'll find yourself feeling no pain at all.

Watch Gwen Verdon—an Anna with deep dark eyes set in a fragile white mask—toss her long (now blonde) hair over her shoulders and tear into a town-hall cakewalk for a first-act finale and you come out into the intermission fairly certain that you'll be hearing "There Ain't No Flies On Me" again.

The generally jovial Merrill tunes keep popping up in nooks and corners of the plot with easy regularity: an ingratiating snake-dance sends an impudent chorus on its way to "The Check Apron Ball"; Cameron Prud'homme, perfectly cast as Anna's father, has a fine time singing "Yer My Friend, Aintcha?" to Miss Ritter; and Miss Ritter gives sobriety a hearty plug in a Settlement House trio called "Chess and Checkers." There are, in addition, two thoroughly workable ballads, something less than inspired in their lyrics but catchy enough as they amble by: "It's Good To Be Alive" and "Look at 'er."

But only these last two plaintive refrains do anything substantial to push the hard-boiled narrative of a soiled lady and a much too demanding seaman toward its destined, hard-won conclusion. The songs, and the high kicks Bob Fosse has arranged for them, inhabit only the nooks and corners of the evening; we keep ducking into friendly bars and gaslit alleys for some fun on the sly.

• • •

The method leaves the O'Neill story looking surprisingly wan. Mr. Abbott, in reworking the tooth-and-nail love story, has minded his business and played the whole thing straight (perhaps too straight—there was some sound, robust comedy in the original that is missing here). But with the secondary figures being handed most of the hi-jinks, Gwen Verdon's Anna becomes a somewhat ghostly, sorrowing, forlorn little chick; you're awfully relieved when she hikes those long skirts and lets rip after nearly an hour and a half. And the turbulent love tangle with Mat (George Wallace) never quite bursts into either a musical, or dramatic, blaze.

• • •

Miss Ritter will win you as she toddles flat-footedly on in Marthy's moth-eaten sweater, her fastidious fingers twitching sassily in the waterfront air. Rouben Ter-Arutunian's lithographic red-brick backgrounds and spindly seaside masts are helpfully flavorsome. And the orchestrations of Robert Russell Bennett and Philip J. Lang keep a schmaltzy confection like "Sunshine Girl" ("The sunshine girl has raindrops in her eyes") lilting delectably.

But there are more than raindrops spattering down on "New Girl in Town." Someone has watered the beer.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

May 15, 1957

O'Neill's Girl Is Out of Town

By TOM DONNELLY.

On my way into the 46th Street Theater I was thinking that Eugene O'Neill's rather faded classic, "Anna Christie," with its lush, brawling sentimentality, was just about ripe for a big musical comedy treatment. There weren't, I thought, any delicate nuances in the orginal that couldn't survive a coating of songs and dances.

Of course, I didn't anticipate that George Abbott, who has written and staged "New Girl in Town," planned to throw away just about everything that makes O'Neill O'Neill. The considerable vitality that "Anna Christie" still retains resides in the passionate simplicity of its central characters.

When Mat Burke, the burly stoker, meets Anna on that coal barge, he is not only aroused by her Viking beauty, he is inspired to an almost superstitious awe by the spectacle of what he takes to be a decent woman, the only decent woman he has ever seen in his grimy life. It is painfully hard for Anna to tell him that she is a former prostitute.

The Plot Is Simple.

In "New Girl in Town" Mr. Abbott has retained the basic plot of "Anna Christie," and in 1957 it seems very basic indeed. (The period has been moved back to the turn of the century, and this allows for some cheerfully garish scenic effects, but it doesn't add a mellow conviction to what's left of O'Neill's story.)

When Anna meets Mat in "New Girl in Town," the encounter is fleeting. It's just boy meeting girl. No resounding overtones. In the second act, Marthy, that battered belle of the New York waterfront, snitches on Anna. Girl loses boy.

Well, eventually there's a happy ending.

It's unfortunate that Mr. Abbott has sought to solve his problems of adaptation by eliminating O'Neill instead of by translating him into musical terms. Perhaps "Anna Christie" is florid and a trifle threadbare. Still, the only scenes in "New Girl in Town" that pack any dramatic wallop are those that are reasonably true to the master.

Professional Polish.

If "New Girl in Town" is, at bottom, hollow, it has a bright and lively surface. The approach may be misguided, but the execution is brilliantly professional. The show lacks inner drive, but it has that Abbott pace.

The cast is wonderfully accomplished. Gwen Verdon's Anna is a touching creature, a child burned by the fire, but wistfully, gallantly determined to crawl out of the ashes. Miss Verdon is invited to lead the revelers at a waterfront ball, and she dances with a sinewy innocence that softens the gaudy scene, and conveys to us unforgettably Anna's picture of herself as a woman reborn. Miss Verdon is, to come right out with it, great.

There is another great lady on hand. As Marthy, Thelma Ritter is a small, bedraggled tigress, and she burns brightly and hilariously through the night. George Wallace sings and acts lustily as Mat, Cameron Prud'homme is fine as Chris, and all of the supporting artists are excellent.

Choreography Tops.

Bob Merrill's songs are not violently distinguished, but several of them are agreeable, and one of them, a rich, sad ballad titled "Sunshine Girl" may very well kick up a revival of the old-fashioned community sing.

Bob Fosse's choreography is easily the season's best: Fast, inventive, and bang on the button. Both the choral and chorus work are outstanding. Rouben Ter-Arutunian's decor is Grade-A.

"New Girl in Town" has all the trimmings that usually make for popular success, and I won't be at all surprised if the cash customers are inclined to ignore the fact that there is no tree under all those ornaments.